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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000126

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, DEFENSE FOR OUSD(P) DMELLEBY

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN SHAKEN BY GENERAL'S MURDER

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Baku is in a state of shock following the February 11 murder in broad daylight of the commander of the country's air force and air defense forces, Lt. Gen Rail Rzayev. He held the rank of Deputy Minister of Defense. Rzayev died from a single gunshot from an assailant who attacked when the General's car made a brief stop on the way to work. The circumstances of the attack clearly indicate a professional hit. Rzayev's murder crosses a line in Azerbaijan, where politics and business can be rough but murders are exceedingly rare. Rzayev, who had served as air force commander since 1992, was a close personal ally of President Aliyev. Embassy sources point to a variety of possible motives for the murder. While we emphasize the sketchiness of available details on this count, the most plausible theory suggests a local mastermind and an unmistakable challenge to the President's authority. End Summary.

A Professional Hit

¶2. (C) The circumstances of Rzayev's murder strongly suggest a professional operation and careful preparation. Rzayev's Ministry of Defense vehicle picked him up at about 0800 local 11 February. Rzayev and his driver were the only ones in the vehicle because his adjutant, an air force captain, had been called away to another duty (Note: Embassy heard this account from an OSCE contact who employs a close associate of the adjutant. End Note.) After traveling about 500 yards the driver stopped, as was his occasional habit, to throw something away in a trash dumpster on the side of the street. While the vehicle was stopped, a single assailant fired into the vehicle, hitting Rzayev in the back of the head. Rzayev died at the central military hospital shortly thereafter. (Note: A different account had Rzayev being shot while walking to his car that was parked 500 yards down the street from his building. End Note.)

¶3. (C) Rzayev was buried within hours of his death, and sources within and close to the police indicated that there was not time to perform an autopsy and it is not known whether the bullet was extracted.

Strange Funeral, Strange Coincidences

¶4. (C) Rzayev's funeral was a hurried, unusual affair at which prominent figures were conspicuous by their absence. No government ministers were able to attend, and even

Rzayev's friends failed to come. General Vahid Akhundov, for example, the security chief of the presidential apparatus, was a close friend of Rzayev and from the same region as the deceased General and notably did not attend.

¶5. (C) The murder was exquisitely timed -- President Aliyev and the key ministers of defense and national security and the Procurator-General were all traveling at the time. Aliyev cut his visit to Kuwait short to return to Baku but the three ministers were not back in time to attend his hastily convened Cabinet meeting.

¶6. (C) All of these factors suggest detailed planning and extensive preparation. Additionally, we note that the murder took place in one of the most secure neighborhoods of Baku - near, in fact, to the building where the Minister of National Security lives. This suggests strongly that not only did the planners of this crime think of everything - distracting the adjutant, co-opting the driver (if the first version in paragraph 2 is correct), defeating or arranging the lifting of probable heavy surveillance of the street, burying the body immediately and advance knowledge (or orchestration) of the simultaneous absence of the key government leaders - they also had the manpower, influence and perhaps money to put all of these moving parts in play.

Whodunit??

¶7. (C) Baku is absolutely rife with speculation as to who

BAKU 00000126 002 OF 002

might be responsible. Some commentators, such as the Zerkalo (Ayna) newspaper's well-respected Rauf Mirkadirov, suggest that Russia might be behind the murder, attempting to destabilize Azerbaijan. He suggested that the murder may be a way to focus Azerbaijan inwardly on a scandalous crime in order to distract the country from widely-believed allegations that Moscow has been transferring weapons to Armenia. (Comment: While Russian special services could undoubtedly organize something like this, no specific evidence points to this and Russia's motive for going after Rzayev would be unclear. Without anything more to base this on, we find the Russia theory hard to substantiate at this point. End Comment.)

¶8. (C) A second possibility is that Rzayev met his end through a shady business deal gone bad. Some diplomatic contacts suggested that Rzayev's murder was the result of the wrong company being shut out of a major acquisition by the air force. Also, in 2004 Rzayev was dogged by rumors that he was using air force assets for private gain. These theories are also hard to substantiate due to their lack of specificity and because they fail to explain the strange coincidences described above.

¶9. (C) A final possibility, which seems on balance to be the most likely explanation, is that the crime was orchestrated from within the government at a very high level, and the real target is the reputation or authority of President Aliyev. Only someone with access to high-level officials and their schedules could have worked out the plan and timing for this attack. It also appears that at some level Ministry of National Security (MNS) surveillance was circumvented, co-opted or defeated. The orchestration of Rzayev's quick burial without an autopsy also would have to involve the subornation of several officials, all of which suggests a perpetrator from within the government.

¶10. (C) Much speculation naturally centers on the Minister for Emergency Situations, Kemaladdin Heydarov, one of the few people in government whose reputation is questionable enough that he would widely be considered a suspect. Newspaper reports suggested that an incident in early December involving a helicopter carrying Heydarov motivated him to

kill Rzayev. No concrete evidence supporting this allegation has emerged. However, Rzayev's closeness to the President would make him an inviting target for anyone in government who has an interest in making it appear that Ilham Aliyev is not fully in control of the country. As the referendum on removing presidential term limits approaches, potential rivals may feel the need to sow doubt about Ilham's control now, before it is too late. For his part, President Aliyev has vowed publicly to solve the crime and thus has placed some of his own prestige on the line in response.

¶11. (C) Comment: This murder has generated a storm of wild, speculative commentary and taken Baku fully by surprise. It is far too early to identify a culprit and a wide range of theories remain plausible. With the limited information available we would cautiously judge that the killing may well have been organized from within the government. If correct, this would represent a stark rebuttal to President Aliyev's claim that his leadership brings stability, normalcy and development to Azerbaijan. His reaction to this case will tell us much about the strength of his grip on Azerbaijan's political life.

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